

Mosco, Vincent and Janet Wasko, eds.
The Critical Communication Review.
Vol. iii: Popular Culture and Media Events.
Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company, 1985.

This is a third volume of the The Critical Communications Review edited by Vincent Mosco of Queen's University and Janet Wasko of the California State Polytechnic. The first two volumes dealt with the working class and the media and patterns of communication control. This volume treats popular culture and media events in a variety of ways, but one theme seems dominant: the idea that culture is "contested terrain." Culture is not only what is produced as commodities by elites, but it is "the site of struggles among classes over the production and interpretation of signs, symbols, and expressions that define themselves and their relationship to one another." (x)

Culture, therefore is, Return of the Jedi, the Academy Awards and the Olympic Games. But it is also working people's parades, the Brixton riots and the literacy movement in Nicaragua.

There are 12 essays in the book grouped in three sections: an historical section dealing with the relationship between popular culture and commodity culture from the mid-19th to the mid-twentieth century; a group of four papers concerned with stars, media events (Olympic Games and Academy Awards) and video games; and, finally, a prescriptive section concerned with alternate methods of analysis and cultural practice.

Taken together, most of the papers deal in one way or another with the intersections of the free market and popular culture. Examples abound. The public spaces of mid-19th century Philadelphia, where parades had been a "powerful vernacular form of communication," were shut down by a centralized police force which suppressed "customary amusements" and chased "beggars, hucksters and musicians off the streets." (20) In the same Philadelphia, during and after the Great War, Jules Mastbaum transformed the

picture shows. Going to the pictures became an evening at the cinema. Mastbaum combined the pictures with opera and vaudeville, and presented the whole in spectacular auditoriums with such success that an evening's entertainment became (until television decreed otherwise), a social institution. Along the same lines is the curious case of the player piano. Jeanne Allen's splendid article tells us that the player piano was an early, perhaps the earliest, form of automated musical performance. As such, it marked a stage in the transition from a crafted musical performance based on finger dexterity and manual technique "to more centrally produced mechanically reproduced mass media." (108) It marked "a gradual shift in the role of the public from active to passive, as the radio and the phonograph replaced the parlor piano as a source of music in the home." (Daniel Klingman)

One last article in this section by Richard Butsch describes the commercialization of leisure. Model airplane building, once the preserve of home hobbyists who sought to construct their models first from household articles but in the 30s (after Lindbergh's transatlantic flight) from kits based on sound aeronautical engineering, was all but revolutionized after World War II by large diversified companies. Using their enormous marketing power, these firms diverted adolescents to plastic (non-flying) replicas of combat aircraft. Flying models were left to very small firms run by hobbyists for an adult market with few young enthusiasts.

In the second section which deals with media events in post-industrial society, one writer comments on the relationship of U.S. media to popular culture, (the U.S. media's coverage of the '76 and '80 Olympic Games boycotts), another on the media's attempt to usurp the sphere of popular culture (the Academy Awards), and still another writer on rock music as "one of the last bastions of pure, laissez-faire capitalism." (204) But surely the most unsettling contention in this section is in Terri Toles' essay regarding video games: for her, video games may be more deadly than we know, because they offer the opportunity for people "to practice subjecting

their judgment to that of the microchip." The use of video games by the armed services embeds the games' assumptions concerning our culture - "the implicit evil of the enemy, the need to destroy our foes completely...without having to take responsibility or even to know the reasons for one's own actions." (221-222)

The last section is prescriptive. The writers' objectives are to create a democratic public culture and to point out the necessity for social struggle. An analysis of British newspapers' accounts of the Brixton riots prompts a re-examination of how historically embedded populist themes bear on the popular imagery of social disorder. The authors argue for more broadly based analysis using content analysis combined with the insights of linguists, structuralists and semioticians. In "Public Opinion, Mass Opinion and Social Opinion," T.R. Young suggests that in the United States the political process has been subverted by state and private capital. Public opinion, or the "basic processes by which people become human, express humanity, and remain human, are neglected" because investment decisions are determined by the interests of private consumption, (i.e. the marketplace). The policy activity of public opinion is forced, therefore, to the margins of the free market where, frequently, it "takes to the street in order to shout its primal distress." What is needed is an authentic public communications process free of the private media's hostility to democratic policy and human enterprise.

In all, the editors have collected here a group of fascinating papers. One or two are descriptive, but most combine intriguing material with solidly based analysis. The editors' concern to broaden and deepen our view of culture, elitist and popular, has been fulfilled.

Reviewed by:

Peter Brown
University of Winnipeg